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CIA Remains Mum on Soviet Defector

By BRIAN BARGER, Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON

The Senate Intelligence Committee has been told nothing about a senior KGB major-general who, according to published accounts, defected to the United States last year and was in CIA custody, Sen. Patrick Leahy, vice chairman of the panel, said Sunday.

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Leahy, D-Vt., said CIA officials continued to tell him as late as Sunday morning that no such defector existed. "They are denying it today," he said.

However, House Intelligence Committee Chairman Lee Hamilton, D-Ind., said he had received a "preliminary report" on the alleged Soviet defector. He declined to comment further until he received a more thorough briefing on the case and said he was "not yet sure about the information."

CIA spokeswoman Kathy Pherson declined comment on the report Sunday, saying only, "We don't comment on defectors."

The alleged defection was first reported in U.S. News and World Report, which said the Soviet officer "was smuggled out of East Germany in late April or early May by helicopter and debriefed at a U.S. base in West Germany." The report said the defection was kept secret "to prevent press leaks that might have upstaged the Geneva summit in Geneva."

The U.S. News and World Report story described the alleged defector as "extremely valuable," and said he fed secrets to U.S. intelligence even before his defection. He was reportedly given a new identity, and settled in an undisclosed location in the Midwest.

Leahy said that at any given time the CIA "handles several significant defectors" whose identities are not made public. He said the CIA was responsible for advising the intelligence committees about defectors, but said he had not received any information on this case.

A congressional source, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said there were "several defectors over the past few years that have not become public, and it could be one of them." He said that details concerning the defector "did not jump out at him," but said "it could be accurate."

The disclosure, and subsequent CIA denials of the report, raised speculation on Capitol Hill that the story may have been leaked to influence an upcoming debate over whether responsibility for handling defectors should be turned over to the FBI.

The CIA was deeply embarrassed last November when Vitaly S. Yurchenko, a senior KGB agent the CIA hailed as one of their "most important defectors" in years, fled his CIA handlers. He turned up two days later at a press conference at the Soviet embassy, claiming he was kidnapped and drugged by the CIA, and announced his intention to return to the Soviet Union.

The CIA denied the charges, and has since maintained he was a legitimate defector who later had a change of heart.

As a result, criticism has mounted within the administration and Congress over the CIA's handling of Yurchenko and other defectors in recent years.

Some officials, including Leahy, speculate Yurchenko was a double agent sent by the Soviets to disrupt U.S. intelligence operations, and embarrass the Reagan administration prior to the Geneva summit.

Leahy acknowledged he has asked for an investigation of the CIA's handling of Yurchenko as well as another, undisclosed defector whom he refused to discuss.

"I took another case simply to look at the techniques used in a case not publicly disclosed to see if the procedures used were the same," Leahy said. "I found the techniques used to be largely the same."

Leahy said defectors should be handled uniformly "by one (agency) or the other," and said current procedures involving both the CIA and the FBI leaves "the authority hazy." He added that he had not yet decided on whether to recommend using the FBI or the CIA in defector cases, and would await the results of the investigation, which he predicted would take "a few more months" to complete.

"When it is done right, everyone claims credit," Leahy said. "But when it goes wrong, everyone says, 'it wouldn't have happened if we had handled it.'"